Exploring *Corridos* and Cultural Power in Viramontes's "Neighbors"[1]

CORE TEXT	"Neighbors" by Helena María Viramontes
POSSIBILITIES TO TEACH FOR CHANGE[2]	This short story addresses themes related to gang violence and drug use, racially-motivated police brutality, the importance of community, and cultural erasure of Mexican Americans living in East Los Angeles. Pavletich and Backus (1994) analyzed "Neighbors" and compared it to traditional Mexican *corridos*. *Corridos* are Mexican ballads that often focus on "injustice and border strife" (de los Ríos, 2017, p. 455). Pavletich and Backus (1994) explained that a traditional *corrido* is "comprised of three major narrative elements: the hard-working man who is goaded into violence, the defense by that man of his right, and his assured defeat by capture" (p. 132). They also explained that this archetypal character "articulates masculinity" sometimes with a pistol representing "male self-assertion within the *corrido*" (p. 132). In *corridos*, the hero is "a symbolic form of opposition to the racist forces of the U.S. legal system" (Pavletich & Backus, p. 134). As Pavletich and Backus pointed out, Viramontes "rearticulates" the traditional *corrido* because the story ends with a woman, the protagonist Aura Rodríguez, holding a pistol. Studying this short story provides students with opportunities to explore the legacy of the Mexican–American War, to speak against abuses of power and racist U.S. immigration policies, to discuss the importance of art and language in culture, to push back against harmful gendered norms or stereotypes that perpetuate patriarchal authority, to share their cultural artifacts, and to imitate how Viramontes uses both English and Spanish in her short story in their own writing to advance cultural and linguistic pluralism. Teaching this short story is an intentional act of resistance to deficit and oppressive perspectives that portray multilingual youth and their language practices as inferior to those performed by monolingual "Standard English"-speaking students (see de los Ríos, 2017 for theory and findings

[1] Any teacher may use this lesson plan. Feel free to adjust it as needed. This is an example lesson based on the Teaching ELA for CHANGE Lesson Plan Template.
[2] This lesson is specifically designed to promote a type of critical literacy pedagogy, *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (see also the References & Resources information below)

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	related to Latinx students' literacy practices). To accomplish all of the above, of course, would take more than one lesson. This lesson plan focuses on a first reading of the short story. Because the assessment for this lesson is a class discussion, this lesson plan would likely extend beyond one class period. Subsequent lessons could incorporate the study of *corridos*, could foster discussion of U.S. immigration policy and state-sponsored violence against people of color, and could support students in writing their own stories inspired by their cultures and the languages they speak that imitate Viramontes's "Neighbors."
LEARNING OBJECTIVE(S)	Students will explore the themes of the short story by comparing events of the parallel plots and by comparing Aura Rodríguez's plot to the narrative structure of traditional *corridos*.
ASSESSMENT	Students will participate in a fishbowl-style Socratic Seminar: Some students will be tasked with focusing on Don Fierro's plot, and some will focus on Aura Rodríguez's plot. The fishbowl-style Socratic Seminar has an inner circle of students expected to participate verbally and an outer circle of students who are tasked with listening and taking notes. At first, students in the inner circle will be those assigned to Don Fierro's plot, and they will discuss potential themes they learned from his story. Then, students will switch circles, and the new group of students in the inner circle will discuss themes from Aura's plot. Finally, all students will discuss potential themes that emerge from comparing the two parallel plots and from comparing "Neighbors" to the narrative structure of traditional *corridos*. During this final part of the discussion, any student may join the inner circle, and students should be encouraged to swap places with a classmate in the inner circle who has said what they wanted to contribute. Teachers can record which students contributed verbally to the discussion and can collect students' notes they took during the discussion for the assessment.
LEARNING ACTIVITIES & STRATEGIES	1. Arrange the classroom so that students can sit next to a partner. 2. Read the story aloud with students and pause at pre-planned spots to facilitate student comprehension.

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	3. Assign students a character's plot (either Don Fierro or Aura Rodríguez's) to follow during the reading. Give them the Parallel Plot Partner Handout with their assigned chart to complete (Appendix A). 4. As you read with them, students should complete their assigned chart. 5. Pause during the reading to give students opportunities to complete their assigned chart. 6. After reading the short story, encourage the partners to think-pair-share and work together on the question from the handout about the themes from each plot line. 7. Give students copies of the "Neighbors" Compared to Traditional Corridos Handout (Appendix B). 8. Tell students to prepare for the fishbowl-style Socratic Seminar by reviewing their character charts and by reading the handout. 9. Facilitate the discussion.
LESSON CONCLUSION	At the conclusion of the fishbowl-style Socratic Seminar, ask students to share with their partner how the themes of "Neighbors" connect to students' lives. Encourage students to volunteer. Remember, you can follow this lesson up with future ones that incorporate the study of *corridos*, foster discussion of U.S. immigration policy and state-sponsored violence against people of color, and support students in writing their own stories inspired by their cultures and the languages they speak that imitate Viramontes's "Neighbors."

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References & Resources

- de los Ríos, C. V. (2017). Toward a *corridista* consciousness: Learning from one transnational youth's critical reading, writing, and performance of Mexican corridos. *Reading Research Quarterly, 53*(4), 455–471.
- Muñoz, A. (2013). Articulating a geography of pain: Metaphor, memory, and movement in Helena María Viramontes's "Their Dogs Came with Them." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 38*(2), 24–38.
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Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world.* Teachers College Press.
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Literature Cited

- The short story "Neighbors" was published in the collection *The Moths and Other Stories* by Viramontes in 1985. Viramontes, H. M. (1985). *The moths and other stories*. Arte Público Press.

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Appendix A: "Neighbors" Parallel Plot Partner Handout

Directions: Complete the chart for your assigned character. One of you will be responding to Don Fierro's story, and one will be responsible for Aura Rodríguez's story. You may ask your partner for help, but each student is responsible for making sure their chart is complete.

Don Fierro				
How is Don Fierro characterized? **What do you know about him?**	**What other important characters are part of Don Fierro's story?**	**What are some conflicts in Don Fierro's story?**	**How are the conflicts resolved?**	**What lessons can you learn from Don Fierro's story?** **(what are some of the themes of his story?)**

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Aura Rodríguez				
How is Aura characterized? **What do you know about her?**	**What other important characters are part of Aura's story?**	**What are some conflicts in Aura's story?**	**How are the conflicts resolved?**	**What lessons can you learn from Aura Rodríguez's story?** **(what are some of the themes of her story?)**

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Appendix B: "Neighbors" Compared to Traditional *Corridos* Handout

Pavletich and Backus (1994) analyzed "Neighbors" and compared it to traditional Mexican *corridos*. *Corridos* are Mexican ballads that often focus on "injustice and border strife" (de los Ríos, 2017, p. 455). Pavletich and Backus (1994) explained that a traditional *corrido* is "comprised of three major narrative elements: the hard-working man who is goaded into violence, the defense by that man of his right, and his assured defeat by capture" (p. 132). They also explained that this archetypal character "articulates masculinity" sometimes with a pistol representing "male self-assertion within the *corrido*" (p. 132). In *corridos*, the hero is "a symbolic form of opposition to the racist forces of the U.S. legal system" (Pavletich & Backus, p. 134). As Pavletich and Backus pointed out, Viramontes "rearticulates" the traditional *corrido* because the story ends with a woman, the protagonist Aura Rodríguez, holding a pistol. During the class discussion, be prepared to explain how Viramontes's "Neighbors" rearticulates, or gives a new perspective on or a new meaning to, the traditional *corrido*.

References

de los Ríos, C. V. (2017). Toward a *corridista* consciousness: Learning from one transnational youth's critical reading, writing, and performance of Mexican corridos. *Reading Research Quarterly, 53*(4), 455–471.

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